

What Matters in Survival: Self-determination and The Continuity of Life Trajectories

By

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that standard psychological continuity theory does not account for an important feature of what is important in survival – having the property of personhood. I offer a theory that can account for this, and I explain how it avoids the implausible consequences of standard psychological continuity theory, as well as having certain other advantages over that theory.

1. Introduction

The following question defines the problem of personal identity: given the degree to which a person changes over their lifetime, what would make it true that they in fact endure or persist over time? The contemporary answer is that there must be a certain relation(s) that holds between the earlier ways a person once was to the ways they are now such that – despite these changes – its presence entails that a person remains the same individual over time.¹

From a contemporary scientific point of view, if a person is anything, it is a psychological-physical object. If so, remaining the same person over time could involve only relations between these types of states. However, a person's psychology is typically considered distinct from their physical body. If so, we can ask whether psychological integrity is more important than bodily integrity is more important to a person when considering their survival over time.

Parfit (1971) offers support for the idea that psychological integrity is what is important with the following thought experiment: suppose a person is diagnosed with a fatal brain disease. However, they have the option of having the healthy part of their brain – now sufficient to maintain their current psychology – transplanted into another body exactly like

¹ This assumes that the problem of identity over time has been settled in favor of a relational view.

their own. Parfit plausibly claims that most would want the transplant, and that this shows that psychological continuity is what is most important to a person when considering their survival over time.

Psychological continuity theory, however, has a well-known flaw with an equally well-known response. Specifically, the presence of psychological continuity over time does not entail the presence of identity over time. According to Parfit, however, identity is not “what matters in survival” (1984: 261-265; 1995: 21-22). What matters is psychological continuity. I show, however, that having psychological continuity alone is not sufficient for having what matters in survival. For this reason, I offer an alternative theory of what matters in survival that I call the “life trajectory” theory.

In Section 2, I present two well-known arguments that show that psychological continuity theory fails as an identity theory. I then discuss the response to this failure – that of rejecting identity as what matters in survival, and I give an argument for accepting this distinct from other arguments. I then offer a neutral definition of the concept of having what matters in survival. In Section 3, I show why psychological continuity theory fails even as theory of what matters in survival. In Section 4, I develop a theory based on the results of section 3 – the life trajectory theory. Section 5 offers reasons for accepting this theory based on its advantages over psychological continuity theory, and section 6 considers some objections to the life trajectory theory.

2. Identity Theories and Having What Matters in Survival

In offering a theory of the identity of any object, the proposed relation that sustains it must be a one-to-one relation, and it must be determinate. That is, two distinct objects cannot be one and the same object, and an object either fully retains its identity or it does not. Finding a relation that satisfies these requirements for personal identity is difficult. First, it is difficult

because the most intuitive option – psychological continuity – fails to have the properties of an identity relation. Second, it is not clear what caring about identity even means in the context of remaining the same person over time from a first-person perspective.

2.1 Psychological Continuity Theory's Failure as an Identity Theory

The most widely accepted account of what it is to be psychologically continuous over time – the relations that must hold between the psychological states a person once had, and the psychological states a person has now – is as follows: first, that person's adjacent psychological states must be similar or resemble one another; and second, their current psychological states must causally or counterfactually depend upon their earlier psychological states.² However, these relations can be sustained without sustaining a person's identity.

The first argument that illustrates that psychological continuity fails as an identity theory is that certain scenarios show that it allows for one-to-many relations between psychologically continuous beings over time. Consider, for example, what is called a "fission" scenario involving tele-transportation.³ Suppose that the Earth is uninhabitable, and Mars is the only planet that can support human life. However, the only means of transportation is tele-transportation. Most people would likely choose to tele-transport to Mars rather than die on Earth, even though 1% of the time the teletransportee "fissions" during the process of tele-transport. A person A fissions during tele-transportation to Mars when, upon arrival, two persons B and C who are perfectly psychologically continuous with A and with one another step out of the tele-transporter. This scenario, however, shows that psychological continuity fails to be a one-to-one relation, since person B and person C are

² For this succinct characterization, see Lewis (1983).

³ Fission scenarios are also discussed by Parfit (1971:5) but were earlier considered by Williams (1976) and Wiggins (1967).

not identical, and neither of them have any better claim than the other for being identical to person A. This illustrates that the presence of psychological continuity over time does not entail the presence of identity over time.⁴

The second argument that illustrates the insufficiency of psychological continuity as a theory of personal identity is that it can come in degrees.⁵ That is, it is not a determinate relation. Imagine, for instance, a person who undergoes several sudden radical psychological changes and is, therefore, to a significant degree, less psychologically continuous with the person they were prior to these changes. If psychological continuity entails identity, its presence cannot be a matter of degree since an object cannot be more or less identical to itself. Identity is all or nothing. This fact, therefore, also shows that psychological continuity is not an identity relation. Psychological continuity theory, then, cannot be a theory of personal identity over time. However, as odd as it might seem, this may not be a conclusive reason to reject this theory.

2.2 Does Identity Matter in Survival?

That the identity relation may not be of central importance to a person concerning their survival, can be seen by considering an objection of Butler's (1736) to Locke's early psychological continuity theory of personal identity (1694), and the subsequent response to Butler's objection.

Locke held that a later subject is identical to an earlier subject just in case the later subject remembers being the earlier subject, also known as the memory theory of personal identity. Butler's (1736) concern was that the theory was uninformative, since a later subject can only remember being an earlier subject if it is already known that that later subject is identical to that earlier subject. Butler assumed that mental states count as memories only if

⁴ For theorists who resist the idea that fission threatens identity, see Carroll (2011), Demarest (2016), and Lewis (1983).

⁵ See Schechtman for more discussion on the degree criterion (2001a).

they accurately portray a subject's past experiences. That is, to say that a subject remembers an event entails that that subject having that memory is the very subject who experienced the remembered event. Butler concludes that Locke's memory theory is, therefore, uninformative because it presupposes the truth of that which it is purporting to explain.

In response to Butler's objection to the memory criterion, some psychological continuity theorists – most notably Shoemaker (1970), but also Parfit – rely on a different notion of memory that does not presuppose the presence of identity. According to Shoemaker, even if Butler is correct about genuine memories, it is possible for a person B to have mental states that are qualitatively indistinguishable from genuine memories, but that reflect the experiences of another person A who is not identical to person B. Call these "quasi memories" or "q-memories." The idea of quasi-memories can be applied to all mental states – desires, hopes, beliefs, and so on. Therefore, the standard requirement of similarity between adjacent mental states requires only qualitative indistinguishability between mental states from a first-person perspective. Being psychologically continuous over time, then, does not presuppose being identical over time.

The concept of quasi-mental states not only allows for a response to Butler, it also raises the question of what else a person could rationally want when concerned about their survival. That is, arguably, a person would have no grounds for complaint if continuity of their quasi-mental states was all they ever had, since it makes no difference from a first-person perspective. If that is correct, then, even if there was a relation that preserved a person's identity, it would be irrelevant for having what matters in survival, not because psychological continuity theory allows for fission or matters of degree, but rather because caring about it is not rational from a first-person perspective.

2.3 Replacing the Concept of Personal Identity with What Matters in Survival

As startling as it might sound to say that identity is not important for having what matters in survival, this is the conclusion that Parfit draws from the fission scenario – that identity does not matter in survival.⁶ However, if identity is not important for a person's survival, which sounds nearly incoherent, what could be important?

Currently, many theorists have accepted Parfit's conclusion. Call these theorists "survivalists." They have the burden of characterizing the concept of what matters in survival. I too accept that identity does not matter, but not for Parfit's reasons. However, I do rely on Parfit and Shoemaker's idea that what matters is a relation(s) holding between an earlier person A and a later person B that is qualitatively indistinguishable from the holding of an identity relation. The holding of such a relation would allow for A and B to both identify B as A's successor, and this is sufficient to have what matters in survival.

I define a relation as mattering in survival if it meets at least the following two general conditions:

- (1) If a person A at moment t , properly causally related to a later person B at moment t_1 , cannot distinguish between themselves and person B, in the same way they would if they had persisted instead of B, then person B has what matters in A's survival.
- (2) If a person B at moment t_1 , properly causally related to an earlier person A at moment t , cannot distinguish between themselves and person A, in the same way they would if person A had persisted instead of B, then person B has what matters in A's survival.

Consider this example as a case of the satisfaction of conditions (1) and (2). Assume that person A and person B are not identical. Now imagine that at moment t , A knows that they will soon die, and arranges to have their brain preserved in some technologically feasible way that sustains their psychology just prior to their cessation. Person A wills their brain to neuroscientists with the instruction to transplant it into a future healthy subject that, unfortunately, experiences brain death. Subject A also wills their possessions to the body

⁶ For more discussion of the details of Parfit's arguments, along with issues about their interpretation, see Johansson (2010), Schechtman (1996), and Williams (1973).

into which their brain is transplanted. At moment t , A identifies with the future of whomever receives their brain as if it is their own future. Now suppose that upon A's cessation at moment t_1 another subject B experiences brain death and their body is therefore available for a brain transplant. Upon the transplant of A's brain into B's body, B awakens recalling from a first-person perspective that A desired to renovate their home. Subject B proceeds to do so. In this case, both conditions (1) and (2) for having what matters in A's survival are satisfied: A believes that their desires will be present in person B in the same way they would have been had A been identical to B, and B has A's desires and acts on them in the same way A would have had A persisted as person B.⁷

Conditions (1) and (2) are plausible candidates for having what matters in survival, at least if all that matters is that a person sustains something qualitatively indistinguishable from sustaining their identity subject to certain causal conditions. If we suppose this is purely a matter of the internal relations between a person's psychological states over time, as several of Parfit's thought experiments appear to illustrate, then psychological continuity theory is a strong candidate for a theory of what matters for survival, despite that the fact that it fails as a theory of identity. However, not all thought experiments support psychological continuity theory as a theory of what matters in survival.

3. Why Psychological Continuity Theory Fails as a Theory of What Matters in Survival

I now turn to a type of scenario in which a person fails to have experiences that correlate with any facts about the external context – what I call a “virtual immersion” scenario. I argue that a specific example of a virtual immersion scenario generates a negative reaction that therefore requires some kind of explanation. The explanation I offer shows that

⁷ The reason for both forward and backward-looking requirements on having what matters in survival should now be clear for at least one reason: the transplant is successful only if there in fact exists a later being who retroactively “owns” their successor's past. For more arguments for both criteria, see Schetchman (2001b).

psychological continuity theory fails as a theory of survival.

3.1 A Case of Virtual Immersion: The Experience Machine Scenario

Virtual immersion scenarios are a good diagnostic of the sufficiency of psychological continuity theory as a theory of what matters in survival, since they maintain psychological continuity in isolation from every other property that might matter in survival. A person in a virtual immersion scenario, if psychological continuity theory is correct, should have everything that matters in survival.

There is, however, at least one example of a virtual immersion scenario that generates a strong negative reaction – Nozick’s experience machine (1998). The experience machine scenario involves a machine that can provide a person with an endless supply of desirable, but illusory, life experiences. The prospect of an entire existence inside this machine, however, makes most people recoil in horror.⁸ Nozick’s explanation of this reaction is that we value more than merely experiencing ourselves as having done certain things, we also want those experiences to be veridical or authentic – to be accurate representations of our interactions with our surrounding environment. But why should veridicality or authenticity be of any value to persons as such?

One hypothesis is that having only passive illusory experiences, rather than experiences that truly occur in an external context, allow a psychological subject to navigate that context in a particular way – to form correct beliefs about it, to deliberate about how to achieve their desires, and to take the required actions that their deliberations indicate that they should. Being able to navigate within an external context in this way is part of what it is to be autonomous.⁹ That is, having reliable veridical experiences are required for a

⁸ The fact that the situation portrayed in “The Matrix” is at all disturbing is proof that many people would have a negative reaction to virtual immersion.

⁹ That believing based on evidence enhances autonomy was emphasized by Kant (1785). Aristotle had a similar idea in which being a person (or “humans” in his terms) in his

psychological subject to have a self-determined life – a necessary component to effectively direct or govern a life or to reliably shape its direction.¹⁰ The experience machine scenario, then, in producing subjects that are mere passive experiencers, threatens those subjects' autonomy or ability to have a self-determined life.

3.2 The Intuitive Argument Against Psychological Continuity Theory

That autonomy is a concept that rivals psychological continuity in its importance to persons is illustrated by the following thought experiment. Recall that in Parfit's thought experiments, in the single-case transplant, most agree that retaining their mind matters more to them than retaining their body, making psychological continuity theory the most competitive as an account of what matters in survival. Suppose this is a good argument strategy for showing what matters in survival. I will now appeal to the very same type of argument, except that in this thought experiment, the choice is between remaining autonomous without full psychological continuity over time, or relinquishing it, but retaining full psychological continuity.

Suppose, for instance, that you are ill with a fatal degenerative brain disease, but that neuroscientists and computer scientists know how to convert sets of psychological states into a digital format. Your doctor offers you the option of having your entire psychology, having digital informational value of approximately 2.5 petabytes, or 2500 terabytes, transferred to a digital storage device. You are warned, however, that scientists cannot convert psychological states back into any format readable by an organic brain, and that it is possible to store 2500 terabytes of data on a digital storage unit only if it is kept at a ridiculously low temperature.

Nicomachean Ethics (trans. Rowe 2002) involves having rational capacities and effectively exercising those capacities.

¹⁰ For arguments that having plans and projects are important for having what matters in survival, see Perry (1976). See Wolf for arguments that knowledge is required for the exercise of free will or autonomous action (1986).

To preserve your entire psychology, then, it must be stored on a device that is not feasibly able to be embodied. If you choose to have your entire psychology converted, then, there will be no way for you to live as the embodied person you once were. You will, however, still be able to communicate with the outside context via projecting your thoughts onto a digital screen with which others can interact. You are also told, however, that there is another option. Your psychology can be compressed and stored on a digital storage unit that can be embodied, but this compression will inevitably result in the loss of the finer details of your psychological states. For example, you may lose some of your memories or current desires, but the general “shape” of your current psychology – the important highlights of your past, your values, understanding of important concepts, general emotional outlook, intelligence, and important goals – would remain the same. This process would, therefore, allow you to keep the defining properties of your psychology in a similar way in which a JPEG file of a tiger, originally a RAW file, still looks like a tiger, even though it fails to contain every tiger-y pixel it had originally.

In the first scenario, although your psychology continues in its entirety, you lose a significant degree of your ability to have a self-determined life. That is, your autonomy would be severely compromised. In the second scenario, this property would be fully preserved.

Now which option is preferable? I suspect the second option is the most attractive – that our psychologies matter, but only insofar as they allow us to continue to be the self-determining beings we had always been. This thought experiment, then, illustrates that autonomy matters in survival, if Parfit’s own thought experiment illustrates that psychological continuity does. If autonomy matters in survival, then because the experience machine scenario threatens it, psychological continuity theory fails as a theory of what matters in survival, since the experience machine scenario does not threaten psychological continuity but does threaten autonomy.

3.3 The Metaphysical Argument Against Psychological Continuity Theory

One problem with the intuitive argument is that it assumes that our intuitions are a guide to what matters in survival. But this is true only against the backdrop of a theory of the nature of personhood. For instance, Parfit's thought experiment that purports to show that psychological continuity matters in survival depends on the theory that a person is made up only of their internal psychological states and physical states. That is, Parfit's strongest argument for psychological continuity is valid only if its structure is understood as depending on the idea that the choice between physical or psychological continuity as an exhaustive dichotomy, which is true only against the backdrop of a metaphysical theory of personhood. Since, in Parfit's thought experiment, a person would choose keeping their psychology intact, as he understands it, over keeping their body intact, he concludes that psychological continuity must be what matters in survival.¹¹

However, the experience machine scenario shows that having only psychological continuity is unsatisfactory for some reason, and as I argued, the reason is that a person in the experience machine lacks autonomy. In fact, even in Parfit's thought experiment, a person's autonomy is not threatened. They may no longer have the same body, but they do not lack a body altogether. They remain embedded in their surrounding environment – able to remain an autonomous agent and pick up their self-determined life as it was before. It is worth considering, then, whether autonomy is also part of what it is to be a person – not an uncommon idea. Autonomy is frequently found on the standard “hitlist” for delineating persons from non-persons.¹²

¹¹ It is ironic that Parfit explicitly rejects Cartesianism and yet retains its fundamental precepts.

¹² See Kant (1785) for a defense of the idea that autonomy is required for personhood. A close cousin, or perhaps the very same concept, is that of agency or free will. These concepts are also often on the standard “hitlist” of properties that delineate persons from non-persons. See Frankfurt (1971), Koorsgaard (1989), Rovane (1998), and Wilson (2005)

Let us suppose, then, that the capacity for self-determination or autonomy is required for being a person. What follows concerning what matters in survival? Well, nothing, at least not without the premise that remaining a person matters in survival.

There are two reasons for believing that remaining a person matters in survival. First, it is arguably a simple conceptual truth. Second, meeting conditions (1) and (2) for having what matters in survival require remaining a person.

On the matter of personhood mattering simply on conceptual grounds, consider the fact that in giving a theory of what matters in the survival of persons, our object of study is...well...persons. Simply by definition, then, being a person must matter in survival.

Now consider whether being a person is required for meeting conditions (1) and (2) for having what matters in survival. Imagine, for instance, that a person knows they will soon inherit several million dollars, and this is something they desire. However, that person also knows that, before this happens, they will become a bunny rabbit. The subject who later inherits the money – the bunny rabbit – is not going to experience that event as if it constitutes the satisfaction of the previous subject's desire, since bunny rabbits presumably are not able to be cognizant of having inherited anything at all. So, conditions (1) and (2) are not satisfied in this case. The person who exists now would not anticipate the bunny rabbit's inheriting the money as satisfying their desire to do so, and the bunny rabbit will not have the experience of having that person's desire for the inheritance satisfied.

So, it seems that being a person matters in survival. As discussed, psychological continuity alone cannot sustain autonomy because it does not require reliable veridical experiences as revealed by the experience machine scenario. Since autonomy is not simply something that matters only intuitively, it matters because it is a property required for being a person and this matters in survival, an alternative to psychological continuity theory as a

for defenses of the idea that agency or free will are essential to personhood.

theory of what matters in survival is required.

The alternative I offer respects the fact that reliable veridical experience – a precondition for a self-determined life – is required for having what matters in survival. I now turn to explaining this alternative – the life trajectory theory of what matters in survival.

4. The Life Trajectory Theory of What Matters in Survival

What are the basic components of being autonomous or of having a life of our own design – a self-directed life trajectory? First, there is the property of having a life in general. I will think of a person's life trajectory as the path of a psychological subject through an external environment individuated by that psychological subject's external relations to that environment. A self-directed life trajectory begins with an action that counts as self-determining or autonomous and is shaped by those types of actions afterwards.¹³ As the experience machine illustrated, being autonomous requires being related to an external environment in particular ways. Logically, being related to an environment confers certain external properties upon a psychological subject. I deduce therefore that the continued having of certain external properties must play a role in an account of what matters in survival.¹⁴

4.1 External Properties and What Matters in Survival

Because external properties play a key role in having a self-directed life trajectory – what I claim matters in survival – I will now explore their nature. Consider, for example, some of my own external properties. For example, I currently have the short-lived external properties of drinking a pop and of typing on my keyboard. I also have some longer-lived external properties – of being the custodian of three dogs, and of being married. However, these

¹³ Of course, a person's life trajectory is not entirely self-directed, luck intervenes more than many of us would like.

¹⁴ Schechtman (2014) develops a similar idea of what matters in survival – that of having a “person life.” The details between the two views, however, differ dramatically.

properties are factually and potentially ephemeral properties of mine. In addition, there are other properties I have that I will always have, such as being the sole author of this work, and of being my father's second born child. These are properties that I will have permanently over my lifetime.

The previous properties individuate my specific life trajectory, at least, currently. My permanent external properties, however, are essential for doing so over time. These properties differ from the more temporary external properties since they do not depend upon my being currently related to the items that confer those properties upon me nor are they properties that anyone else can have. For example, having the external properties of drinking a pop and of living in a particular location depend upon being currently related to a container of pop and to a particular location. In contrast, being the author of this work does not depend upon being currently related to this work. This work could be destroyed completely and yet I would still have the property of being its author. Similarly, having the property of being my father's second born child is true of me even though my father has passed away and I am no longer currently related to him. That is, having some permanent external property depends only on the fact having been related to the item that conferred it at some point in time. For this reason, only permanent external properties can essentially delineate a single continuous life trajectory over time, even though at least some of the temporary external properties can delineate a person's life trajectory at a given time.

Therefore, it could only be permanent external properties that could matter in survival over time. And these properties also matter to a person intuitively. They are a part of what gives a person a sense of continuity over time – of what grounds their current sense of that a particular earlier subject has what matters in their survival, and the continued having of such properties are part of what grounds their sense that a particular later subject

has what matters in their survival.¹⁵

4.2 Continuity and Permanent External Properties

If the continued holding of permanent external properties is necessary to have what matters in survival, an account of their continuity over time is needed. Now, one obvious way to ensure their continuity is for the very same subject that has them to continue over time. However, this would rule out a survivalist theory of what matters in survival, since this way of continuing to have certain permanent external properties requires the retention of a person's identity over time. But this is not the only way to understand the continuity of a person's external properties over time. As Shoemaker and Parfit did, I too can appeal to the idea of retaining something qualitatively indistinguishable from retaining identity to explain what is required for the continuity of permanent external properties.

I claim that there are two conditions that must be satisfied to have what matters in survival concerning permanent external properties:

- (3) If a person A at moment t , properly causally related to a later person B at moment t_1 , cannot distinguish between themselves and person B concerning their permanent external properties, in the same way they would if they had persisted instead of B, then person B has what matters in A's survival.
- (4) If a person B at moment t_1 , properly causally related to an earlier person A at moment t , cannot distinguish between themselves and person A concerning their permanent external properties, in the same way they would if A had persisted instead of B, then person B has what matters in A's survival.

Conditions (3) and (4) define what matters in survival concerning a person's permanent external properties. If they hold of a later person B, then that person has what I will call the "quasi-counterparts" or "q-counterparts" of earlier person A's permanent external properties,

¹⁵ On the life trajectory theory, the claim that what matters in survival is the continuation of some external properties does not need to be supported by our direct intuitions. That they must matter in survival is a consequence that follows from other facts, like the fact that being a person matters in survival. Since being a person requires being connected to an external context in a way that allows that person to have a self-determined life, and this requires the continuity of certain external properties, it follows that the latter must matter in survival.

and this is part of what is required for an earlier person A's life trajectory to continue.

Now what is it to have the q-counterpart of another person's permanent external properties? That is, what is it for a person to be qualitatively indistinguishable from another in terms of their permanent external properties – to satisfy conditions (3) and (4)? To state it simply, person B must be able to occupy A's previous environmental niche in the same way A would have if A had persisted instead of B. For B to do so, they would have to satisfy two requirements – that of retaining the character of A's permanent extrinsic properties, and that of retaining the property in its permanent external form.

The reason for the character requirement is that different people might have the same property in different ways. That is, two people might both be cyclists, but for different reasons, with different skill levels, and have different attitudes towards it. Concerning a person's permanent external properties, then, since conditions (3) and (4) require qualitative indistinguishability, for any person B to have what matters in survival for any person A, the character of A's permanent external properties must be sustained. For example, imagine that at moment *t*, A had the permanent external property of having authored a certain work. For A, having this property came with the following characteristics: (a) that of believing that they had authored that work; (b) that of remembering having authored it; (c) that of feeling dissatisfied with that work; (d) that of having successfully published it under their name; and (e) that of taking and being given credit for it. For another person B to satisfy conditions (3) and (4) for having the q-counterpart of having authored a certain work, it would have to have the characteristics of (a)-(e).

Concerning retaining the character and form of A's permanent external property of having authored a certain work, person B could easily have a property with features (a)-(c) simply by being psychologically continuous with A. However, having a property with features

(d) and (e) requires something slightly different. For B to satisfy conditions (3) and (4) concerning the property of having authored a certain work with feature (d), B would have to be able to claim to have published that work under their name that, originally, was a singly authored work just as A would have, if A had persisted instead of B. And, for B to satisfy conditions (3) and (4) concerning feature (e), B would have to be disposed to be given and to take credit for its authorship in the same way A would have, if A persisted instead of B. To retain the property of having authored a certain work in its permanent external form, person B would have to persist in a way that never threatened that property so long as B exists.¹⁶

Two issues arise concerning the continuity of the counterparts of a person's external properties. The first concerns the stringency of conditions (3) and (4). The second concerns the indeterminacy of a person's future permanent external properties.

The first issue, more specifically, raises the question of whether a later person B satisfies conditions (3) and (4) for all, or only most, of person A's permanent external properties. For simplicity and accessibility, I will simply stipulate that B is, in fact, required to meet both conditions for all of A's permanent external properties. However, the theory need not be this strong. The same points could be made by replacing the notion of indistinguishability with the notion of significant discernible difference, for instance.

The second issue raises the question of how any person in the future other than A could count as having the counterparts of A's permanent external properties given the fact that if A had persisted, they could or might have changed in many ways regarding these properties. For instance, if A had persisted, A's future could have included gaining various new permanent external properties, such as having children or inventing the world's best

¹⁶ As I will argue later, both the character and form requirements rule out certain scenarios as those in which a person has what matters in survival.

can opener.

How, then, could any person other than A retain the counterparts of A's permanent external properties? This might appear to be an intractable barrier to the life trajectory theory. However, it is not because conditions (3) and (4) require only that a later person B has the q-counterparts only of the properties A would have had, not could have had, after A ceases to exist. That is, the permanent external properties that A had at time t – the time of their cessation – are the only properties that they are guaranteed to have had if they had persisted. A later person B, then, can satisfy conditions (3) and (4) if B retains the permanency and character of the permanent external properties that A was guaranteed to have had they persisted.¹⁷

5. The Appeal of the Life Trajectory Theory

I argued that being a person is required for having what matters in survival. I then offered an identity neutral account – the life trajectory theory – that accommodates this. The fact that the theory is identity-neutral is appealing because there are those who reject identity as required for survival, but who do not endorse the standard psychological continuity theory. Furthermore, identity theorists could also adopt it, properly modified.

The theory is attractive for more reasons than this, however. First, it rules out fission cases as those in which a person has what matters in survival – an odd scenario for anyone to accept. Ruling out fission is, of course, essential for its appeal to identity theorists, but also for those non-identity theorists who wish to reject the fission consequence of psychological continuity theory. Second, the life trajectory theory can account for varying intuitions about virtual immersion scenarios better than psychological continuity theory can.

¹⁷ Given the controversy about whether the future is open or determined, I believe this is reasonable.

5.1 Fission and the Unity Reaction

While it might appear as though a non-identity theorist should have no qualms about fission as a case in which we have what matters in survival, this is not logically required. In fact, there are several non-identity theorists who have expressed doubts about fission as a way of having what matters.¹⁸ And this is reasonable. After all, it was not an intuitive position initially, not even for Parfit. Call those who believe identity does not matter, but who reject fission as a way of having what matters “Parfitian unitarians.” For these theorists, having what matters requires unity over time, but it does not necessarily identity over time.¹⁹

To be unified over time is to remain an organized or structured complex or systematic whole. This does not require being an object that retains its identity.²⁰ For example, consider a sports team I will call “The Changelings.”²¹ Suppose that The Changelings win the championship every year, but that its individual members are different each time the team wins. Fans of The Changelings attend every game the team plays and celebrate its victory every year. However, even though The Changelings win the championship every year, there is no object The Changelings that does this winning over time. There is no group of winners, for instance, that we can congratulate on their long-lived success. Nevertheless, The Changelings remains a unified team for which we can cheer at every year’s final championship game. Being unified over time then is not the same as being identical over time. While unity does not entail identity. The properties do share

¹⁸ See Korsgaard (2003), Schechtman (1996), Sosa (1990), Rovane (1998), Unger (1997), Whiting (2002), and Wolf (1986). For Whiting (2002), for instance, having what matters in survival requires that we consider ourselves as a single continuous being over time, stemming from Locke’s observation that personal identity consists in the fact that a thinking being “can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places....” (L-N 2.27.9). Her theory requires accepting only unity, but not identity.

¹⁹ See Belzer (2005) who introduces the difference between what he calls the “identity” reaction and the “unity” reaction.

²⁰ See also Perry (1972) for discussion of this distinction.

²¹ Offering conditions for team unity is much more tractable, I believe, offering identity conditions for a team.

something in common – neither is present in fission scenarios.

The life trajectory theory requires unity over time and is, therefore, fully consistent with Parfitian unitarianism.²² The reason that it requires unity, and therefore rules out fission scenarios as sustaining what matters in survival is they threaten the q-continuity of a subject's permanent external properties. As it turns out, these properties can be held only by one successor over time.²³

To illustrate, reconsider psychological subject A, and their property of having authored a certain work. Now imagine that A at moment t undergoes a procedure that results in A fissioning into two subjects B₁ and B₂, both psychologically continuous with, and yet distinct from A. Now, can B₁ and B₂ have the q-counterpart of A's permanent external property of having authored a certain work? I believe that the answer is "no."

First, consider the way in which A had the property of being the author of a certain work – features (a)-(e). While both B₁ and B₂ will have the psychological features of (a)-(c) – both will believe that they authored the work, remember having authored it, and feel dissatisfied with it. However, B₁ and B₂ cannot both have features (d) and (e): two separate people cannot have the q-counterpart of being the publisher of a singly authored work; and neither can they both have the q-counterpart of taking credit for and be given credit for having done so. Furthermore, B₁ and B₂ cannot both presently have the q-counterpart of A's property of having singly authored A's work.

Of course, it could be argued that even if B₁ and B₂ cannot have the q-counterpart of

²² If a non-identity theorist to still endorses psychological continuity as what matters, but also endorse the life trajectory theory, an externalist interpretation of psychological continuity is needed.

²³ One potential objection to this criterion is that it begs the question. That is, in assuming that there are permanent external properties that only one being can have at a time, I have guaranteed that fission cannot preserve what matters. But this objection fails since the life trajectory theory does not begin with the assumption that properties that be held by only one being at time are what matter in survival. Rather, this followed from other assumptions for which there is independent motivation.

having once had the property of singly authoring A's work – they can have something like A's original property, say, that of having co-authored it. However, having the property of being a co-author has a distinct character from being a sole author, and its form is different. That is, having co-authored a work is a different property from having single authored a work. So, while both B1 and B2 can claim to be psychologically continuous with something that once had A's property of having authored a work, and this is not something that just anyone can claim, still, having once had A's external property of being the author of a work no more counts as having that property's q-counterpart than would merely having once had A's memories. Neither fission product, then, can maintain what is required for what matters in survival on the life trajectory theory.²⁴ Parfitian unitarianism, therefore, itself attractive, can be adopted by the life trajectory theorist.

5.2 Virtual Immersion Scenarios

The second positive consequence of the life trajectory theory is that it can explain and predict a range of intuitions about virtual immersion scenarios. To illustrate, reconsider the experience machine and a variant of that scenario.

In the experience machine case, I claimed that most would react with horror at the possibility of being immersed in a context in which their experiences were entirely de-correlated with facts about their external context. The explanation for this horror was that, in such a scenario, a person loses what matters in survival due to the loss of our personhood via losing their autonomy. Now consider a different scenario. Imagine the anticipation a person might feel if all psychological subjects could rid themselves, en masse, of the

²⁴ Even if condition (1) is relaxed in certain ways so that a successor of A need not be completely indistinguishable with respect to certain permanent external properties of A's, nevertheless, because they are external properties, certain environmental conditions would still need to hold that would rule out the possibility of that two beings could have the q-counterpart of a property like that of being the single author of a certain work. Still, even if condition (1) is relaxed, it is relatively unlikely that all permanent external properties would not be required.

shackles of their decaying bodies by immersing their psychologies within a shared, interactive virtual context, maintained independently of their bodies. Suppose that, somehow, our aging, dying biological bodies become obsolete. Surely, a respectable number of us would look at such a scenario as a way of achieving immortality.²⁵

As I argued, standard psychological continuity theory predicts that we do have what matters in cases of virtual immersion, and therefore it can predict our reaction of anticipation to the second case. However, it cannot predict our reaction of horror to the experience machine case. In contrast, it appears that the life trajectory theory can predict our reaction of horror, but it cannot predict our reaction of anticipation. Therefore, standard psychological continuity theory gets it wrong for the first virtual immersion case, but right for the second one. And the life trajectory theorist gets it right for the first case, but wrong for the second one. Therefore, neither theory is to be preferred over the other, at least if these facts are correct.

However, the life trajectory theory is more versatile than it might at first seem. It turns out that it can in fact predict the correct reaction to the second virtual immersion case. To see this requires re-conceptualizing what it means to exist in an external context, however. Our natural assumption is that these kinds of contexts must be identified with spatial temporal contexts. But this assumption might be rejected if technology advances to the point of allowing for purely virtual interactions that can allow for the ways a person can interact in the spatial temporal realm – their external context. In this case, a purely virtual environment could count as a mind-independent external context – assuming shared experiences within that environment that are themselves governed by predictable, systematic laws that allow for a person to form correct beliefs about it, to deliberate about

²⁵ For details about different ways these possibilities might be realized and their potential implications, see Chalmers (2010). Sauchelli (2017) addresses how such “life extending” techniques may or may not fit with certain narrative conceptions of what matters in survival.

how to achieve their desires, and to take the required actions that their deliberations indicate that they should. If a virtual environment can be so understood, then a person could still have external properties that could persist over time or that they could have permanently. The life trajectory theorist could then say that what matters in survival can be maintained in such contexts.

6. Objections

I now address three objections to the life trajectory theory. The first concerns the role of metaphysics in any theory of what matters in survival. The second concerns theories of personhood. And the third concerns whether the life trajectory theory can accommodate another type of virtual immersion scenario.

6.1 The Metaphysics of What Matters in Survival

Once the idea that offering a theory of the identity of persons over time is misguided and that the proper focus is on understanding what it is to have what matters in survival, the question of how to determine the appropriate constraints on this concept naturally arises. For example, an identity theorist might argue that any property that could matter in survival is one that matters only to a life of value, not one that matters in survival. That is, giving up on identity theories entails that there is no difference between a life worth living and having what matters in survival.²⁶ And, having a life worth living can be an idiosyncratic highly individualized matter, not a topic befitting generalization, unlike what is required for having what matters in survival. That is, if a life worth living cannot be distinguished from what matters in survival, then it is possible that what matters in survival can be at stake for a person who so highly values their lucky left big toe that, for them, losing it would kill them and a person who requires that medical professionals refrain from resuscitating them if they can no longer be self-sufficient. The former property does not seem to be a reasonable

²⁶ Thanks for Michael Watkins for this question

candidate for having what matters in survival, but the latter property does. However, if there is no difference between a life worth living and what matters in survival, then theories of what matter in survival could no longer distinguish between these two properties.

Clearly, appealing to this previous distinction threatens to undermine the entire project of offering any theory of what matters in survival whatsoever – at least one with any grounding in metaphysical concerns.²⁷ A particular constraint that rules out this consequence, then, is needed. The constraint I rely on are the requirement for being a member of the kind person – at least in part a metaphysical kind. Losing a big toe cannot plausibly be argued to be part of being a person, but autonomy, as I earlier claimed, could be.

That the topic of what matters in the survival of persons is metaphysical, to some extent, is illustrated by the fact that relying on a background theory of the metaphysics of personhood is required to even raise the question of what matters in the survival of persons, as I argued earlier in section 3.3.

6.2 Personhood, What Matters in Survival, and Psychological Continuity Theory

Having argued that personhood is needed to survive, there are at least two ways that the psychological continuity theorist might try to defend their theory as one of survival.²⁸ One way is to argue that the subject in the experience machine retains a self-determined life and is therefore still a person -- retains what matters in survival. The second way is to simply deny that autonomy is something required for personhood.

The first way to defend psychological continuity theory is to claim that because that

²⁷ This is where Schechtman (2014) and I would disagree. She argues that practical concerns are metaphysical concerns. But this does not do justice to the worry that some practical concerns of some people cannot be plausibly construed as concerns about what matters in survival.

²⁸ Note that both ways require that the psychological continuity theorist deny that the consequences of the experience machine threaten anything that matters in survival.

subject chose to enter the machine, and every experience they have afterwards is the result of their original choice, they are in fact living the lives they want to live. The psychological subject in the experience machine, in fact, does not fail to have autonomy because their life in the experience machine is the result of a choice made on their part. Therefore, they are still a person insofar as being autonomous is concerned. In response, note that simply making a choice and having the situation obtain that a person chose to achieve does not entail that that person has a self-determined life. Consider, for instance, a parent who wishes their children to be happy, and they plan things so that this is true after their death. Of course, simply because the parent's chosen situation is realized, this is not part of that parent's self-determined life since their life has ended. Examples like this illustrate that the mere realization of a person's initial choices does not entail having a self-determined life. This line of argument from the psychological continuity theorist, then, does not appear promising.

The second way the psychological continuity theorist can respond is to deny the claim that autonomy is required for personhood and that therefore the experience machine fails to threaten a psychological subject's personhood, and therefore fails to threaten what matters in survival. To evaluate this response, I consider some theories of personhood that do not require autonomy, and I argue against each of them. While this does not entail that autonomy matters, autonomy is a plausible requirement for which several have offered independent arguments.²⁹ In addition, I argued earlier that it is a plausible explanation for what is missing in the experience machine scenario, as well as illustrating its importance over psychological continuity in some scenarios. Again, this is not a deductive argument that autonomy is part of what it is to be a person, but it makes it a likely candidate for being

²⁹ Again, see Frankfurt (1971), Kant (1785), Koorsgaard (1989), Rovane (1998), and Wilson (2005).

required for personhood.

One alternative theory of what it is to be a person that does not include autonomy as part of what it is to be a person is the theory that a person is a being that is delineated by having the property of self-awareness – a kind of higher-order conscious state. As Baker (2013) would put it, a person is a being that can have conscious states that have a “first-person perspective.”³⁰ Perhaps a more informative way to understand this idea is that a person is a being that can have conscious states that have a self-oriented perspective. Put the latter way, however, it is not clear that other psychological beings that are not standardly understood to have the property of personhood, do not have such states. For instance, it surely seems that when it is time to clip the nails of my dogs, they show self-awareness. Each seems to know that it is their own nails that are to be clipped and that this is unpleasant, which they illustrate by running away as soon as they see the clippers coming out of the drawer.³¹ I assume that my dogs do not likely think to themselves that I, one of the dogs that lives here, is going to have my nails clipped. Still, their behavior indicates that they do have self-awareness or a self-oriented perspective. So, either a dog is a person, or personhood requires more than self-awareness. I will assume, tentatively, that a dog is not a person. If not, then having self-awareness, or having a self-oriented perspective, is not sufficient for personhood.

Another idea is that a person, unlike a dog, must have more complex higher order states of consciousness than simple self-aware conscious states. That is, a person can

³⁰ Note that the concept of having a first-person perspective is being used to understand the concept of having a self-aware conscious state. But how can the concept of self-awareness be an informative way to understand the concept of personhood, since the former is understood terms relying on the latter?

³¹ According to Lycan (2001), this would entail that dogs have higher-order states of consciousness, but I am not sure this would be a happy result for theorists that are known as “HOT” theorists who believe that such states distinguish persons from other types of cognitive beings. Rosenthal’s (1986) theory has the same problem.

have conscious states about their conscious states. For instance, a person can have anxiety about having anxiety about getting to sleep, which prevents them from sleeping, but my dogs do not seem to have this problem, at least, at first glance. Having states of higher-order consciousness like these then do, at least, separate certain types of cognitive beings as failing to be persons, from others.³² Still, it is not clear that even this criterion for is a sufficient condition for personhood. Consider, for instance, the Borg from Star Trek. These creatures are beings that are controlled by a central intelligence that itself may have higher order thoughts, and yet, there is no obvious single entity that has the property of being a person. The collective consciousness is too fragmented, while the singular consciousness of any given Borg likely has only simple self-awareness, if that. Having higher-order conscious states, then, could be a necessary condition for being a person, but if the Borg have such states, but is not a person, the presence of such states does not suffice for being a person.³³

The previous theories are psychological theories of personhood. However, they are seriously flawed as discussed.

6.3 Other Fission Scenarios

There are other ways fission might be realized that could be argued are consistent with the life trajectory theory, which would rule out its adoption by the Parfitian unitarian, something I claimed as an advantage of the theory. I consider one such way and suggest that it is not clearly a case of fission, and therefore it does not threaten my claim that the life trajectory theory rules out fission as a way of having what matters.

³² In fact, this is the idea that Frankfurt (1971) uses to distinguish beings that have free will from beings that do not. An idea that goes hand in hand with self-determination, autonomy, or agency.

³³ Carruthers's dispositionalist account (1996) improves upon these ideas since the states must be about oneself, but in terms of being used to address a theory of what matters, it would either beg the question, or count The Borg as a single person.

One non-standard fission scenario is explored by Martin (1995), which he calls “fission rejuvenation.” In this scenario, we suppose that when we are, say, 30 years old, a scientist offers us the opportunity to undergo fission, except that one fission product is kept unconscious, and we then continue our life as before. The unconscious fission product remains physically preserved until our death with continuously updated psychological states of its future predecessor. Once the conscious fission product ceases, the unconscious one is awakened and picks up where the conscious one left off. We can imagine this continuing indefinitely. Martin claims that this is a case of fission, and if that is correct, it appears to be one that meets the requirements of the life trajectory theory for having what matters in survival. However, the claim that this is a true case of fission is questionable.³⁴ It is not clear, for instance, whether this case is not better described as a case of sophisticated body cloning that includes a mental state transfer process. The claim that fission rejuvenation counts as a true case of fission, then, needs more careful consideration before we could draw any strong conclusions about the life trajectory theory.³⁵

7. Concluding Remarks

I argued for a theory – the life trajectory theory -- to replace standard psychological theory, since I believe it captures more of what counts as a person than that theory does. I also argued that the life trajectory theory fares better with respect to our intuitions about certain cases, such as fission and different kinds of virtual immersion scenarios.³⁶ Since standard

³⁴ Suppose that we have an entire world that fissions. Would each fission product then count as having what matters? The answer I think would depend upon whether the q-counterparts of external properties are themselves individuated by their intensions or extensions. Thanks to Eric Schwitzgebel for bringing this possibility to my attention.

³⁵ See Martin (1995) for reasons for thinking it is a case of fission.

³⁶ The position explored shares similarities with other views but is still distinct. In particular, the externalist aspect of the life trajectory hypothesis is not new, and neither is the Parfitian view of identity. However, the emphasis on the importance of personhood for having what matters, and their specific way in which externalism and Parfitian views about identity are combined is novel. For comparison, Whiting’s (2002) work supports Parfitian singularism,

psychological continuity theory cannot accommodate as many of our intuitions as the life trajectory theory can, we ought to reject that standard theory in favor of the life trajectory theory.³⁷

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but is driven by internalist considerations. In contrast, Lindemann's (2014) work on personal identity is externalist, but hers is focused on social relations, rather than on all external relations.

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